

The Concept of Sri Lanka for Sri Lankans

- For all those in the pearl of the Indian Ocean and those outside

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After the World War II, specially in the second half of the present century, many countries and racial groups have surfaced attempts at re-writing their national histories. The result of this has been more deliberate distortion than clarification. The desire for supremacist escalation in all areas like religion, ethnicity and political ideology has been the basic driving force behind these mischievous moves. The cold war of the western Big Powers and the Crusades and the Holy Wars of a much earlier era are good examples of such despicably bad moves. Over several millennia in the history of the world, there is evidence to believe that bodies of people, both large and small, have moved from region to region over land and sea. New homes have been established with varying degrees of success and failure, sometimes with admirably robust fusion of cultures. And with bitter ceaseless feuds at other times. This has yielded in many areas settlements of peaceful co-existence. The reasons for their success may be sought in different fields. Magnanimous humane considerations of mutual intermingling as against petty provincialism, choice of assimilation and survival as against ceaseless death and destruction through tribal or tribe-like battling have contributed immensely towards these. On the other hand, mythical and legendary stimulation of clan supremacy and race superiority have in most instances whipped up these waves of devastating fanaticism.

The world is reaching a stage today, whether we like it or not, of treating these as stupid acts of jugglery of our lunatic past, which should be spoken of as fundamentalist or by whatever other name one chooses to call them. Heaven above at any rate cannot and must not be invoked in defence of such genocidal ventures. Sri Lanka has a reasonably datable history, going back to well over two and a half millennia. Like the chronicle histories the Kojiki and the Nihongi of

Japan which trace the origin of the island cluster of the Japanese archipelago to an act of divine intervention, the ancient chronicles of Sri Lanka, the Dipavamsa and the Mahavamsa, trace the arrival of the forefathers of the present day majority community, viz. the Sinhala, to a date as far back as the sixth century before Christ. Historians agree that they came from the northern territories of India. While there is a greater degree of agreement that they came from the eastern regions of the Gangetic valley, from the land of the Vangas, i.e. the present day Bangladesh, there are some scholars who preferred a western origin for them, from the region of the Indus river. In either case, the term Sinha or Singh seems to be appended to their name, associating them with the lion as an animal. Such quasi-historical associations, totemistic or mythical, linking humans with animals in their ancestral origin, is known from the histories of many ancient people in the world. But with this large body of people who emigrated into the island country of Sri Lanka, in peace or through force, the link with the lion seems to have been vitally important. They seem to choose to trace literally the origin of their clan name Sinhala to Sinha or Siha, the lion. In the records of the early Chinese Buddhist pilgrim travellers of the fifth and sixth centuries A.D., Fa Hsien and Yuang Chwang, we discover references to Sri Lanka as Sinhala, i.e. the Land of the Lion People: Seng - chia - lo. This name is again translated into Chinese as Shih - tse Kuo which means the Land of the Lion Offspring People. To these early visitors to the island, of nearly one thousand five hundred years ago, Sri Lanka of today was the land of the Sinhala.

Beneath and behind these references to the origin of the Sinhala people in Sri Lanka, we also have several strands of historical and semi- historical anecdotes which precede these by several centuries. Early monastic literary and historical records of Pali Commentaries known as the Atthakatha, the Pali chronicles like the Mahavamsa and the village level popular records like the Rasavahini and the Sahassavatthu written in the Pali language, all know of the distressing episodes of regular invasions from the neighbouring subcontinent. The rivalry of the invader, as far as all records go, seems to have been aimed at

both the political acquisition of territory and the destruction of culturally and religiously valuable assets of the island dwellers. It might invariably have been a quest for more land for settlement and economic exploitation as well as a desire for religious and cultural domination over an apparently challenging neighbour who already had considerable assets and power in peninsular India. The glorious history of Buddhism in south India during the period under consideration bears testimony to this. Both archaeological remains and literary records which have been left behind lead us in this direction.

These petty ethnic and religious bickerings which were inflicted on the smaller island community of the Sinhala by its neighbours would not have been, in the early stages, anything more than nibbling on the fringes. However, absence of retaliatory action seems to have been misjudged as weakness. Through gradual deterioration Anuradhapura had already fallen into the hands of the invader, with Elara on the throne. King Kavantissa of Rohana, Dutugemunu's father, had already sensed the danger of these infiltrations. He was no political imbecile. He certainly did not deserve to be insulted by his son Gamani, as the chroniclers ambitiously try to make out, with a gift of women's clothing for an alleged reluctance to fight a war of defence. Kavantissa was more than a military strategist. On the route from Rohana to Anuradhapura he had garrison towns set up, with abundant food supplies and armaments. He even appointed his second son Tissa in charge of them. With a great deal of family assistance both from the father and the mother [Vihara Maha Devi being a great woman of immense courage and penetrative vision], Gamani inflicted a crushing defeat on Elara. Through this much needed war of defence Gamani reclaimed and retrieved the lost position and prestige of the Sinhala and the Buddhists of the day. Both were groups to reckon with. [Of what Walpola Rahula, Gananath Obeyesekere, Bardwell Smith and others have to say mischievously about Dutthagamani, we have already expressed our opinion in many places. Two serious critical studies on the subject by the author - 1. Texts and Traditions Warped and Distorted and 2. Dutugemunu Episode Re-examined can be had on request.]

The triumph of Dutugemunu over the aggressive invaders who were disruptive of the cultural stability and the peace of the island and the respect he is said to have shown to his fallen enemy appear to have contributed very much to the rebuilding of Sri Lankan unity in the island. In the absence of provocative acts of aggression of a minor or major nature, prompted from within or without, the two ethnic groups of the Damilas and the Sinhallas seem to have resumed their process of peaceful co-existence, respectful of each other's religious and cultural differences. The major community of Sinhallas appear to have continued to absorb into their pantheon, with a remarkable degree of reverence, Hindu divinities like Skanda, Ganesha and Pattini. With the Sinhallas, they became divinities of household veneration, with Ganesha presiding over Wisdom [Ganadeviyo nuvana denda], and with Skanda promising to be [matu buduvana] a Bodhisatva or future Buddha. The kings of the later Polonnaruva period even provided their queens of south Indian origin with temples for the worship of their Hindu divinities. Archaeological remains of the Polonnaruva period provide ample evidence of this. Scholars like Senarath Paranavitana have repeatedly pointed out these, while dissentients with vested interests have painfully distorted them. They have diabolically falsified history and spoken of Buddhists as hating Hindus, to prove thereby that the Sinhallas hate the Tamils. The Buddhists know very well, much more than others, that the Hindus, very early in their history, have made the Buddha an incarnation or avatar of Visnu. Fortunately both statements are readily available in their printed versions for further verification and necessary action. In these circumstances, for justice and fair play, the like of a Nuremberg trial probing into Nazi dealings, is indeed, not asking too much.

These browsings relating to more than one thousand years of Sri Lankan history and culture make us look back with regret and immense pain of mind at the calamitous and catastrophic happenings during the last fifty years in Post-independence Sri Lanka. The wreckage, we wish to emphatically say absolute wreckage, delivered to both parties, at times with pride, but with no indication of the agencies responsible for these, show many black-boxes left on the scene like

in a major air disaster. We certainly have no doubt that most of those fact-revealing black-boxes on the scene are still intact. Subject to non-partisan analysis and scrutiny, like in the recent TWA air crash off New York, they will bring to light many unsuspected areas of political arrogance, indiscretion and even dishonesty on the part of leaders of many groups on both sides, who at times have had to pay the price for these with their lives. Religious considerations, instead of being oil on troubled waters as they really ought to be, have been used as highly inflammable stuff. In the recent years, as the conflict flared up into a raging battle, rescue teams who arrived on the scene from outside, mostly theoreticians like historians and social analysts, have acted less as fire-fighters. We believe most have turned out to be flame-throwers, well stocked with incendiaries. This sort of unscrupulous exploitation of world situations, we believe, is nothing peculiar to the Sri Lankan scene. It is being witnessed even today as we attempt this study. Sad to say, they are internationally linked with political, religious and ethnic leanings.

In situations like these, we need powerful, impartial and level-headed leadership, both from within the states involved and outside, whose sincerity and honesty is unquestionably above board. Their world vision has to be much higher than that of Allies or Axis groups of World War II. They must firmly demand that social justice, human rights must gain priority over petty, disproportionate ethnic or religious demands. The total concept of humanity is a much larger and more worthy cause to serve. Other forms of thinking and approaches contrary to this are being called upon daily to pay wages which they could realistically ill afford to pay. The entrenched battle in Sri Lanka today is between the Sinhalas and the Tamils, the ingenious test-tube baby or unwanted child whose paternity it is less important to establish now. It has certainly to be aborted. It has already assumed monstrous form and proportions. In battle array are two ethnic groups whose demographic percentage relationships are naked facts. A third one in Sri Lanka is silently or less silently watching the encounter. It is no doubt a very opportune time for bargaining.

All these three ethnic groups of Sri Lanka, Sinhala, Tamil and Moslem [Muslim], were not necessarily born in the land. They did not have their genesis there. Perhaps not even one. The story of ' traditional homelands ' of history makers has been proved to be more than a myth. We did indicate above that even the forefathers of the Sinhalas originally came from some part of north India, east or west and settled anew in Sri Lanka. Priority of arrival of any group in the land, as we look back into distant history, is comparable to the arrival of children in a family. The numerical strength of each ethnic group as large or small depends on its relation to the early or lateness of its arrival in island and the size of families they have chosen to register under their name. It is quite like the size of children in a home according to their respective ages.

Be that what it may, it is time for Sri Lankans living anywhere in the world today to realize that serious blunders in history, in most cases in the areas of ethnicity, politics and religion, which have been caused by unsuspecting miscreants who undoubtedly appear very well intentioned, have brought about serious corrosion and denudation in the lives of religious and ethnic groups. Such disaster is evident in almost every continent. Sri Lankan history today shows that it has gone much too far, like Macbeth wading in blood. The various communities in Sri Lanka who from generation to generation have genuinely known what peaceful co-existence in our small island country has been have to seriously think of regaining their sanity. Instead of domestic and nearer home well-being of inter communal harmony within a single homeland, they have been tempted with perverse thinking of global gains which are disruptive of domestic peace. Yielding to these offers of new gains amount to acts of treacherous betrayal. These disrupted and disruptive loyalties are surely to be viewed as no less than high treason. The Sri Lankan communities, both major and minor, have to seek to recover from the ill effects of being thus severely drugged and being made to think viciously for petty personal gains. The onus of this must collectively fall upon all communities who inhabit the island. They must become fully aware that they must rid themselves of this calamitous individualistic philosophy of the

present age and opt instead for a global collectivist ideology for human welfare. The old saying charity begins at home should hold sway here. Those within a single state should seek for common bonds of unification within rather than seek elsewhere for grounds of differentiation and discrimination.

Let us proclaim in one voice that we opt for a united Sri Lanka, with this land from end to end, north to south or east to west undivided. It has to be an undivided total Sri Lanka for Sri Lankans in whichever nook or corner they be. Nothing less than a collectivist vision shall be acceptable. A guaranteed territorial integrity alone will ensure economic viability. A territorial division by way of political charity or diplomatic magnanimity, sponsored and delivered through any form of political ingenuity will shatter our Sri Lankan cultural identity of which, until these recent years of political bigotry, both insiders and outsiders have spoken with pride and pleasure. It is under such a blanket of multi-lateral comfort and protection alone that we shall thrive. Some of our neighbouring countries which pursue such a policy through pressure or persuasion show us proof of this. The result of a territorial division and a consequent ethnic fragmentation, contrived through ingenious statecraft, would not be very different in effect from the man-manipulated crack up of the ozone belt in the southern hemisphere, close to the Antarctic, inviting death and disease to the humans through the infiltration harmful ultra-violet rays of the sun.

Hence it is our deep conviction that some day, in the not-too-distant future, it has to be a Sri Lankan nationalist government that rules the island and not a nationalist Sri Lankan government. It has to be inclusively many nations united as one within Sri Lanka and not Sri Lanka exclusively of one nation. On this fundamental and vital issue of the State of United Sri Lanka [not to be confused with a United States of Sri Lanka] which infallibly possesses territorial integrity, the majority community of the Sinhalas as well as the minority ones of Tamils and Moslems have to think alike. It is our wish and prayer that it should be so and that it would be so. Let us revive and retrieve Sri Lanka's confidence in Sri

Lanka. She has already had it.